

Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Study Guide

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Literary Devices
Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Underground

The “underground,” the “dark cellar” from which the Underground Man claims to be writing, is a symbol for his total isolation from society. He feels rejected and shut out from the society to which he is supposed to belong, and he imagines that he is viewing the world through cracks in the floorboards. The Underground Man often claims, however, to prefer the underground to the real world above. He treasures the space the underground gives him to exert his individuality—one of the few things he possesses.

St. Petersburg

The city of St. Petersburg serves as the backdrop for *Notes from Underground* and many of Dostoevsky's other works. The Underground Man makes frequent negative references to the city's climate, culture, and cost of living. His primary complaint is that the city is artificial: he describes it as an “abstract and intentional city,” implying that nothing about the city feels natural or real. St. Petersburg is, in the Underground Man's eyes, rigidly systematized, bureaucratized, and alienating. St. Petersburg *is* an “artificial” city in a sense: it was built from scratch starting in 1703 by decree of Tsar Peter the Great, who hoped that the new city would become a “window on Europe.” In 1713, St. Petersburg became the capital of Russia, but it never shook its origin as an artificial city. Peter the Great's desire to bring more European culture into Russia stimulated the Russian captivation with Western culture that Dostoevsky frequently criticized. For Dostoevsky, then, St. Petersburg is doubly artificial: not only was it built to order, but it also symbolizes the artificiality of the Russian adoption of European culture.

The Crystal Palace

The real Crystal Palace, a vast exhibition hall of glass and iron, was built in London for the Great Exhibition of 1851. The structure used the most advanced materials and technology available at the time. For progressive thinkers of the era, the idea of a crystal palace represented the ideal living space for a utopian society based on reason and natural laws. The Underground Man says he despises the idea of the crystal palace because he cannot stick his tongue out at it. By this he means that the blind, obstinate faith in reason that the crystal palace represents ignores the importance of individuality and personal freedom. However, the Underground Man seems to feel this way only about the crystal palace as envisioned by utopian thinkers, describing their palace as a "chicken coop" posing as a crystal palace. A real crystal palace would celebrate truth and harmony without reducing the complexities of human nature to confining mathematical laws, but the Underground Man cannot imagine its existence.

Money

For the Underground Man, money is a symbol of power. The Underground Man's poverty keeps him from feeling socially or even morally equal to others. He is deeply ashamed when he has to borrow money. In the few circumstances when the Underground Man attempts to exert his power, he is giving or withholding money. He tries to break Apollon's pride by withholding his

wages, and he thrusts money into Liza's hands as she leaves his apartment in a deliberate attempt to assert that she is still nothing but a prostitute.

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Motifs



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The Underground Man: Character Analysis

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